Veronesi and the minimalism

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"... As radical surgery had the ultra-radical surgery and control of metastases (oophorectomy, hypophysectomy and adrenalectomies) now we turn to a trend that we might call minimalist... "

Oscar Rodríguez Grimán

To Carmen Cristina, who was in 1983, one of the first to dare to keep her breast.

According to the Dictionary of the Spanish Language, when we say, for example, a deafening silence, we are using a syntactic figure called oxymoron, that is just the resource that allows the combination of two words or expressions diametrically opposed. In these combinations, between extremes, often underlies a concept of character. This resource is used skillfully by Umberto Veronesi and colleagues in a recent publication in The Lancet Oncology entitled Conservative mastectomy: Extending the idea of breast conservation (1). Saying "conservative mastectomy" is a contradiction, but not unsustainable, if we see it from the perspective of an oxymoron. This article takes us through classicals aspects of any item of its kind, such as: the description of the technique, complications, oncological safety and aesthetic outcome. But it is a conceptual issue where the authors make almost a rhetorical exercise. Already raised in the title tag line, "extending the idea of breast conservation", argue that doing a mastectomy, a total removal of glandular tissue, preserving the skin and nipple-areola complex (NAC) and substituting the volume with an implant or autologous tissue, we are talking about preservation. On this point there are two considerations: 1) the breast is, from their point of view, the overlying skin and necessarily the NAC. 2) If the NAC is removed, it couldn’t be considered a "conservative mastectomy," according to the authors.

Veronesi, a remarkable milanese surgeon, in 1981 showed that a quadrantectomy with axillary dissection plus adjuvant radiation therapy was equal, in terms of survival and better in quality of life, to the Halsted mastectomy in patients with tumors less than 2 cm and node negative axilla ( 2). At that time, to do less than a Halsted’s mastectomy, was nonsense, it was daring to propose doing less surgery in the uncompromising world of surgical demolition era. A few years later, in the mid nineties, quadrantectomy, in a new development of the reductionist tendencies, began to give way to a new procedure: lumpectomy, which is simply removing the tumor and a small margin of healthy tissue. Bernard Fisher, one of the leaders of the project NSABP, said in his talk at the Miami Breast Cancer Conference by that date, the following: "The lumpectomy is another manifestation of the halstedian paradigm, lumpectomy is an idea of the new era"
Today, three decades after its original proposal, Veronesi and colleagues seek to expand the concept of preservation from lumpectomy to mastectomy so called conservative. Arguing whether conservative mastectomy is a radical procedure with immediate reconstruction or an enhanced conservative procedure, would likely be expanding an eternal and sterile discussion. We need to focus on carefully monitor the minimalist trend that is becoming more robust in all fields of surgery. Minimal cosmetic impact incisions, miniature instruments and minimum procedures such as sentinel node biopsy, are pure and simple minimalism. The trend has also focused on the small details and Veronesi shows it in his article, with a large space dedicated to the preservation of the NAC. The insistence on preserving this small and important area of skin seems insignificant for the eyes of many, but not to the general perception, because the NAC is not a breast itself, but represents its innermost essence. If someone wants to censor a nude female torso would only have to cover the NAC; as a colleague said to me recently, a woman can show much of her breast openly with an audacious dress and is feels like she is naked only when the NAC pops up and it displays gloriously above the fabric. Doing the minimum, preserving the minimum will be the prevalent policy as Veronesi puts it certainly and convincingly.

References:

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